

NAI1P096/02.015.01

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EXTRACTOR SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER PROGRAM PRODUCT FOR MANAGING NETWORK ACCESS ON A PER-APPLICATION BASIS

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to firewalls, and more particularly to restricting access to a network on a per-application basis.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

In the space of just a few years, the Internet--because it provides access to information, and the ability to publish information, in revolutionary ways--has emerged from relative obscurity to international prominence. Whereas in general an internet is a network of networks, the Internet is a global collection of interconnected local, mid-level, and wide-area networks that use the Internet Protocol (IP) as the network layer protocol. Whereas the Internet embraces many local- and wide-area networks, a given local- or wide-area network may or may not form part of the Internet.

As the Internet and its underlying technologies have become increasingly familiar, attention has become focused on Internet security and computer network security in general. With unprecedented access to information has also come unprecedented opportunities to gain unauthorized access to data, change data, destroy data, make unauthorized use of computer resources, interfere with the intended use of computer resources, etc. As experience has shown, the frontier of

cyberspace has its share of scofflaws, resulting in increased efforts to protect the data, resources, and reputations of those embracing intranets and the Internet.

Firewalls are intended to shield data and resources from the potential ravages
5 of computer network intruders. In essence, a firewall functions as a mechanism
which monitors and controls the flow of data between two networks, or a network
and a device. All communications, e.g., data packets, which flow between the
networks in either direction must pass through the firewall; otherwise, security is
circumvented. The firewall selectively permits the communications to pass from one
10 network to another network or device, to provide bidirectional security.

Recently, there has been much work on software applications referred to as
“personal firewalls.” These applications are typically installed on a computer or any
other computing device for protecting against unsecure networks coupled thereto.
15 During use of such personal firewalls, network traffic is monitored and filtered based
on a predetermined set of rules. Such rules may include any filtering criteria that
protect the device. For example, such criteria may result in the prevention of
computers having certain IP addresses from accessing the protected device,
precluding access to certain ports associated with the protected device, the
20 prevention of certain applications accessing the protected device, etc.

Various system and methods have been developed to accomplish the task of
preventing certain applications from accessing a network. For example, U.S. Patent
No. 5,987,611 discloses a computing environment with methods for monitoring
25 access to an open network, such as a WAN or the Internet. The system includes one
or more clients, each operating applications or processes (e.g., Netscape Navigator®.
or Microsoft Internet Explorer® browser software) requiring Internet (or other open
network) access (e.g., an Internet connection to one or more Web servers). Client-
based monitoring and filtering of access is provided in conjunction with a
30 centralized enforcement supervisor.

The supervisor maintains access rules for the client-based filtering and verifies the existence and proper operation of the client-based filter application. Access rules which can be defined can specify criteria such as total time a user can be connected to the Internet (e.g., per day, week, month, or the like), time a user can interactively use the Internet (e.g., per day, week, month, or the like), a list of applications or application versions that a user can or cannot use in order to access the Internet, a list of URLs (or WAN addresses) that a user application can (or cannot) access, a list of protocols or protocol components (such as Java Script®) that a user application can or cannot use, and rules to determine what events should be logged (including how long are logs to be kept).

By intercepting process loading and unloading and keeping a list of currently-active processes, each client process can be checked for various characteristics, including checking executable names, version numbers, executable file checksums, version header details, configuration settings, and the like. With this information, the system can determine if a particular process in question should have access to the Internet and what kind of access (i.e., protocols, Internet addresses, time limitations, and the like) is permissible for the given specific user.

Unfortunately, systems such as that set forth in U.S. Patent No. 5,987,611 require an additional software layer between the operating system and the network device in order to govern network access.

Prior Art Figure 1 illustrates one exemplary positioning of such a software layer. As shown, a software stack 10 is positioned between a plurality of applications 12 and a network device 14 such as network card, interface, etc.

Normally, such software stack 10 includes an operating system layer 16, a network driver interface specification (NDIS) layer 18, and an Internet Protocol (IP) layer 20. Systems such as that set forth in U.S. Patent No. 5,987,611 require an

additional software layer **22** to intercept network access requests made by various applications.

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DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

5 A system, method and computer program product are provided for management of network access on a per application basis. Initially, applications are selected from a group of applications adapted for working in conjunction with a first application program interface to gain access to a network. Next, a second application program interface is utilized which is adapted for precluding all of the applications from accessing the network.

10 In use, the selected applications are wrapped for allowing such applications to access the network via the second application program interface.

15 In one embodiment, the selected applications may be wrapped with a wrapper adapted for compressing data in a portable executable (PE) image. Further, the wrapper may equip the compressed data with extractor code adapted for extracting the data in the PE image. Such extractor code may further be adapted for interfacing with the second application program interface.

20 In another embodiment, the extractor code may be further adapted for identifying a location in memory. Such location in memory may be where a routine is stored for allowing the selected applications to access the network.

25 Still yet, a user may be permitted to select the applications to be allowed to access the network via the second application program interface.

To accomplish this, a data structure may be stored in memory for management of network access on a per application basis. Such data structure may include an application program interface object for precluding a plurality of applications from accessing a network. Further, a wrapper object may be provided

for wrapping selected applications for allowing the selected applications to access the network via the application program interface object.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 illustrates the prior art.

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Figure 1A illustrates an exemplary network environment, in accordance with one embodiment.

Figure 2 shows a representative hardware environment associated with the computers of Figure 1A.

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Figure 3 illustrates a framework that may be implemented on the architecture shown in Figure 2.

Figure 4 illustrates extractor code and a portable executable (PE) image that may be employed in the context of one embodiment.

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Figure 5 is a flowchart of a method for management of network access on a per application basis, in accordance with one embodiment.

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Figure 1A illustrates a network architecture 100, in accordance with one
5 embodiment. As shown, a plurality of networks 102 is provided. In the context of
the present network architecture 100, the networks 102 may each take any form
including, but not limited to a local area network (LAN), a wide area network
(WAN) such as the Internet, etc.

10 Coupled to the networks 102 are data computers 104 which are capable of
communicating over the networks 102. Also coupled to the networks 102 and the
data computers 104 is a plurality of end user computers 106. In the context of the
present description, such end user computers 106 may include a web server, desktop
computer, lap-top computer, hand-held computer, printer or any other type of
15 hardware/software network device. More detail regarding an exemplary
embodiment of such data computers 104 and user computers 106 will be set forth
hereinafter during reference to Figure 2. A gateway 108 may optionally be coupled
between the various computers.

20 Figure 2 shows a representative hardware environment that may be
associated with the data computers 104 and/or end user computers 106 of Figure 1A,
in accordance with one embodiment. Such figure illustrates a typical hardware
configuration of a workstation in accordance with a preferred embodiment having a
central processing unit 210, such as a microprocessor, and a number of other units
25 interconnected via a system bus 212.

The workstation shown in Figure 2 includes a Random Access Memory
(RAM) 214, Read Only Memory (ROM) 216, an I/O adapter 218 for connecting
peripheral devices such as disk storage units 220 to the bus 212, a user interface
30 adapter 222 for connecting a keyboard 224, a mouse 226, a speaker 228, a

microphone 232, and/or other user interface devices such as a touch screen (not shown) to the bus 212, communication adapter 234 for connecting the workstation to a communication network 235 (e.g., a data processing network) and a display adapter 236 for connecting the bus 212 to a display device 238.

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The workstation may have resident thereon an operating system such as the Microsoft Windows NT or Windows/95 Operating System (OS), the IBM OS/2 operating system, the MAC OS, or UNIX operating system. It will be appreciated that a preferred embodiment may also be implemented on platforms and operating
10 systems other than those mentioned. A preferred embodiment may be written using JAVA, C, and/or C++ language, or other programming languages, along with an object oriented programming methodology. Object oriented programming (OOP) has become increasingly used to develop complex applications.

15 Figure 3 illustrates a framework 300 that may be implemented on the architecture shown in Figure 2. Of course, the framework 300 may be implemented in any desired environment.

As shown, a software stack 302 is positioned between a plurality of
20 applications 304 and a network device 306. In the context of the present invention, each of such applications may refer to any program designed to perform a specific function directly for the user or, in some cases, for another application program, etc. Examples of application programs may include, but are not limited to word processors; database programs; Web browsers; development tools; drawing, paint,
25 and image editing programs; and communication programs. Further, the network device may include a network card, and/or any other type of device capable of interfacing a network.

Similar to the prior art, the software stack 302 includes an operating system
30 layer 308, a network driver interface specification (NDIS) layer 310, and an Internet Protocol (IP) layer 312. Such layers operate in a conventional manner to afford

communication between the applications **304** and the network device **306**, as well as various other functionality. For example, the NDIS layer **310** refers to a standard that defines an interface for communication between the MAC sublayer and the protocol drivers, which offers protocol multiplexing so that multiple protocol stacks
5 can be used at the same time.

Further provided is an application program interface (API) **320**. Such API **320** is associated with the operating system layer **308** and includes a specific method prescribed by a computer operating system **308** or by an application **304** by which a
10 programmer writing an application **304** can make requests of the operating system **308** or another application **304**.

Traditionally, such API **320** identifies a plurality of addresses that correlate which prescribed routines are stored in memory. These routines are adapted for
15 being called by the applications **304**, and receiving and carrying out requests relating to accessing a network via the network device **306**. Often, such routines reside in a standard place in memory, and the API **320** is equipped with such locations for carrying out the task of network communications. In the context of the present description, standard computers are equipped with a first API that is adapted to
20 operate in this manner.

In one embodiment, a second API **320'** is also provided for altering the aforementioned framework for purposes that will soon become apparent. In particular, the second API **320'** is adapted for requiring applications to call a
25 different location in memory in order execute the aforementioned routines. In other words, upon the installation of the second API **320'** (without any further modifications to the system), the applications are unable to access the routines necessary to access a network.

In the context of the present description, the second API **320'** may include a copy of the first API **320** which is subsequently modified by an installation program or the like, or a completely separate API which leaves the first API unused. Of course, the second API **320'** may take any form that is capable of providing the
5 functionality set forth herein.

Further provided is a plurality of wrappers **322** which are each associated with one of the applications. For reasons that will soon become apparent, only those applications **304** that are to be able to access the network are equipped with such
10 wrappers **322**. Of course, these applications **304** may be selected in any desired manner such as via a user, a administrator, automatically, or in any other desired manner.

In use, such wrappers **322** may reroute the requests made by the associated
15 applications **304** to use the second API **320'** to access the aforementioned routines in the appropriate locations in memory. To this end, only those selected applications **304** that equipped with the wrappers **322** are capable of accessing the network via the network device **306**. More information regarding one exemplary embodiment of how such wrapper **322** may work will be set forth during reference to Figure 4.

20 In summary, a data structure is provided for management of network access on a per application basis. Such data structure may include an application program interface object for precluding a plurality of "as-is" applications from accessing a network. Further, a wrapper object may be provided for wrapping selected
25 applications for allowing the selected applications to access the network via the application program interface object.

Figure **4** illustrates extractor code **400** and a portable executable (PE) image
30 **402** that may be employed in the context of one embodiment. In particular, the aforementioned wrappers **322** of Figure **3** may be adapted for compressing data in

the form of a portable executable (PE) image **402**. Note the format **404** of one exemplary standard PE image **402** shown in Figure 4.

Further, the wrapper **322** may equip the compressed data with extractor code **400** adapted for extracting the data in the PE image. Such extractor code **400** may further be adapted for interfacing with the second API **320'**. In particular, the extractor code **400** may be used to extract the PE image for use in accessing the appropriate locations in memory.

Figure **5** is a flowchart of a method **500** for management of network access on a per application basis, in accordance with one embodiment. As an option, the present method **500** may be carried out in the context of the architecture of Figures **1** through **3**. Of course, however, the present method **500** may be executed in any desired context and environment.

Initially, a plurality of applications is provided which are adapted for working conjunction with a first API to gain access to a network. See operation **501**. As mentioned earlier, standard computers are equipped with a first API that is equipped to operate in this manner.

Next, in operation **502**, the selection of certain applications is permitted. Again, these applications may be selected in any desired manner such as via a user, an administrator, automatically, or in any other desired manner. As mentioned earlier, such selected applications are originally adapted for working only in conjunction with a first API to gain access to a network.

In operation **504**, a second API is installed which is adapted for precluding the applications from accessing the network. Further, the selected applications are wrapped for allowing the selected applications to access the network via the second API. See operation **506**.

While various embodiments have been described above, it should be understood that they have been presented by way of example only, and not limitation. Thus, the breadth and scope of a preferred embodiment should not be limited by any of the above-described exemplary embodiments, but should be defined only in accordance with the following claims and their equivalents.

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